The Effect of Sales Assistant-Customer Interaction on Immersion inside Retail Stores

Rancati Gaia, Barraza Jorge

Purpose of the Study: In highly symbolic consumption contexts such as premium-luxury stores, the role of sales assistants is key to provide service to customers. Sales assistants and customers engage in a dynamic exchange where strong social-relational processes and uniqueness motives drive consumption. While most of this research relies on qualitative methods and self-reported measures, this study takes a neuroscientific approach by measuring the immersion, which is an experience of deep attentional and emotional involvement during the value co-creation. In particular, we assess the degree of sales assistants' immersion in two retail stores during the personal selling process, and how immersion affects customer purchase.

Research Gap: Although retailers have understood that value is always co-created through the interaction between sales assistants and customers, prior service research focuses on qualitative methods based on recall, without considering a neuroscientific approach to measure the attentional and emotional dynamic during the service experience. Furthermore, as technology swiftly advances, wearable and wireless devices allow neuro-data collection inside real settings, providing higher external validity results outside of the laboratory. Therefore, we propose that customers respond to high levels of sales assistants' immersion by increasing their purchase likelihood. We also expect that the high level of sales assistants' immersion and the visit duration led to greater interest and higher customers' purchase intentions. Lastly, we expect that the length of the relationship between sales assistants and customers positively impacts the immersion by increasing the purchase.

Research Methodology: We analyzed 49 unique service interactions (30F, 19M) in a study conducted in two retail stores. Biometric data was collected across the sales interaction using arm worn heart rate monitors on the sales assistant and processed using Immersion NeuroscienceTM, a platform which captures realtime neural signals associated with attention and emotional resonance. All interactions were timed to obtain visit duration data. Regression analyses were performed to predict purchasing behavior.

Findings: Results supported hypotheses 1, but not 2 and 3. The sales assistant experienced significantly higher immersion for clients that led to sales, versus non-purchase clients ($t= 1.83(47)$, $p= .03$). A logistic regression found that while immersion ($b= 5.93$ $SE= 2.56$ $p= .05$), dwell time ($b= 7.83$ $SE= 84.95$ $p= .005$), and loyalty ($b= 4.03$ $SE= 1.04$ $p= .05$) all significantly predicted purchase, there was no significant statistical interaction found to support hypotheses 2 and 3. Moreover, we found that immersion was higher for new client experiences, versus those classified as loyal ($t= 1.92(47)$, $p= .03$).

Originality/Value: This paper is the first to use wearable sensors to analyze the sales assistants' neurophysiological responses during the value co-creation process in real retail settings. This study also demonstrates that neuro-tools can unveil the dynamic nature of service exchange and the effect on customer purchase.

Implications: Immersive retail experiences can be measured passively in real retail environments. While it is not known whether the retailer is mimicking the immersion of the customer, or vice versa, we find that the sales assistants can serve as a data source for gauging the likelihood of the service experience resulting in a sale. Future research should examine why sales assistants may be less immersed in sales interactions with returning customers.